

KELET

Sometime in the hopeful early years of the 20th century, a coterie of Hungarian artists, intellectuals and literati got together in Budapest, then still the twin capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to found the avant-garde journal *Nyugat*. Among its founders and long-term contributors were such literary luminaries as Endre Ady, Attila Jozsef and Sandor Marai, as well as a little-known graphic artist named Mihaly Biro (1886-1948). Although Biro would go on to establish a reputation as the premier propagandist of his generation starting in the immediate postwar era, it is a cover design conceived for *Nyugat* in 1911 – that is to say, three years before the beginning of the end of the world as *Mitteleuropa* knew it – that may be his finest work: in it, a muscular naked man is shown from the back, legs striding, and arms spread wide to greet the glory of an enormous setting sun that is one-third obscured by receding clouds. One can tell this is a setting, not a rising sun, because of the lettering crowning its curve: “*Nyugat*” means “west” in Hungarian. *Nyugat* was founded at a time when the world’s undisputed art capitals were western metropolises like Paris and Munich (the rise of New York even further to the west was then still many decades in the making); artists and writers starved for avant-garde action in the eastern backwaters of the Dual Monarchy or neighboring czarist Russia were right, of course, to always turn west for glimpses of the future. The “west”, in their minds, equaled freedom, opportunity, progress – much like it sometimes seems to continue to do today. And its opposite, the putative “east” from which so many of these restless, aching artists hailed, stood for backwardness, bigotry, oppression, and a fatalistic sense of incorrigibility – much like it sometimes seems to continue to do today. But isn’t the east the land of the morning sun? Does not all light originate in the east, the traditional fount of wisdom? Indeed, what good the worship of a *setting sun*? Isn’t the west where the world goes to sleep – that is to say, comes to an *end*?

The complex semantic tangle of east versus west (and evidently always also that of north versus south) has recently been thrown in renewed stark relief, of course, by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a geopolitical shockwave on a scale comparable to (if not greater than) that of 9/11 – another historical caesura of recent vintage that has often been theorized as a function of atavistic east/west and north/south divides. Indeed, Biro’s image painfully rehearses the movement currently dominating headlines around the world:

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the massive westward trek of millions of Ukrainians and residents of Ukraine escaping Russia's senseless campaign of mass destruction in their homeland, seeking safety and security in a west that may therefore once again feel vindicated as the putative home of reason. (I am writing all of this down on 31 March 2022; on this day, according to the United Nations, the number of refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine has passed the four-million mark.) The east, as embodied by Putin and his Kremlin cronies, has once again come to symbolize backwardness, democratic deficit and despotism, lethal reaction, superstition. And within Ukraine itself, millions of people have left behind their homes in Donetsk, Kharkiv and Kyiv for the relative security (again, at the time of writing) of Lviv, the cultural capital of *western* Ukraine – a city whose occidental location has long marked it as a natural gateway to the enlightened world we continue to identify as quintessentially “western” to this day: the European heartland of the postwar liberal consensus represented by Germany, the Low Countries, France, and, in extremis, Great Britain and Poland. (Much has been made about the fact that Putin's invasion of Ukraine may have “accidentally revitalized the West's liberal order.”) It is an interesting change of status for a city once known as Lemberg, the capital of the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria, by far the most primitive, poorest and least developed – because *easternmost* – crownland of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And it is worth keeping in mind that Lviv (Lvov, Lwow, Lemberg, Leopoldis) is just 700 kilometers away from Vienna – yet more reason why a reconsideration of the many meanings of our enduring east-west divides seems so urgent, topical, and timely, especially in a place like Vienna, especially in this extraordinary moment of unparalleled geopolitical alarm. Indeed, the basic impetus of the curatorial framework I am proposing here is a call to rethink the standard narrative of this psycho-geographic tension at a time when we may once again be tempted to lazily demonize the “east” (not just Russia, Putin and the Kremlin but also, just as importantly, China) and idealize the “west”. Now is the time to look east, not just for bogeymen and easily identified pathologies and perversions, but also for hope – for inspiration, salvation. For the rising sun of promise that is called “Kelet”, not “Nyugat”.

In adopting the title “Kelet” (“east”) as the obverse of “Nyugat” (“west”), I invite the participating curators and galleries of *Curated by* to turn their gaze eastward at a moment when artists from Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slo-

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vakia, Ukraine and other nations may need it most – a time when the west’s inherent “orientalism” and resurgent “orientalizing” of Europe’s others must be challenged and held in check. [1] (The participating galleries may either invite “their” guest curators to “look east”, or instead opt to invite curators hailing from said “east”.) My hope is that this curatorial framework will result in a complex panoramic picture of “our” east or “Kelet” – from the near east of Bratislava to the far east of Khabarovsk – as an imaginary land bathed in the sun of artistic riches and renewal. Just don’t call it Eurasia.

Dieter Roelstraete, Chicago – March 2022

[1] Hungary is a particularly interesting case in point here, as Viktor Orban is under increasing pressure to distance himself from a Kremlin he had long been looking at as an alternative pathway out of the perceived paralysis of the western liberal order. It is significant, in this regard, that I am using the Hungarian word for “east” as the title of my framework. In fact, I first encountered Mihaly Biro’s design for the cover of *Nyugat* during a chance visit to the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest; Biro’s image has been haunting me ever since, and I am hoping to be able to loan this work from said museum to be exhibited in Vienna in the context of *Curated by*. I likewise propose to commission a design very much like Biro’s, but sporting the word “Kelet” instead, to function as the project’s overarching campaign image.